

So Keep Us Safe by falafelfiction

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Summary:

When Steve and the kids find themselves trapped in the tunnels after El closes the gate, Steve makes it his mission to keep everyone safe and sane during their long wait for help. Canon divergence story inspired by the Thai cave rescue.

1. Day One

Author's Note:

So like most of the world, I've been glued to the Tham Luang rescue story all week. So to celebrate the miraculous news of all 12 kids and their coach being safely extracted from the cave, I felt inspired to write something. And since I hadn't written fic for a while, I got the idea of doing a Stranger Things version of the rescue story. I keep thinking what that situation must've been like for the coach and thought I could channel that into a Steve-centric scenario with him having to take care of the kids for a little longer after the S2 finale. Not sure how many parts this will be or how they'll get out of the tunnels yet.

"Nobody is going to die down here, you got that?" Steve stood with one hand on his hip, one finger raised. "That's an order! Not one of you little shitheads is dying on my watch."

Four faces stared up at him and nodded, wanting to believe him. The kids were breathing hard into the scarves covering their mouths and noses, their eyes wide behind their goggles.

The five of them stood huddled around the rope that dangled from the cavern ceiling. The rope that they were supposed to climb up to make their escape through the hole in the pumpkin patch. The rope that was now completely useless to them. The vines had sealed in a tight knot around it, trapping them all down in the tunnels.

"What if the dogs come back?" asked Max, her voice a low rasp.

Steve steeled himself, repressing a shudder.

"If they come back, everyone gets behind me. I'll handle it."

Steve raised the nail bat in his shaky fist. The kids nodded again but they didn't look too reassured. The last time the dogs came charging towards them, Steve barely had time to lift his weapon. He'd been so

shocked by the furious stampede of demodogs that he hadn't landed a blow on any of them. Instead he'd just pushed the kids up against the cave wall, stretching out his arms and doing his best to shield them from the sudden rush of monsters.

That had only been about twenty minutes ago. Now it was all quiet in the tunnels. Too quiet. If the dogs came back then Steve's only plan was to try and hold them off while the kids ran for it. And that plan seemed most likely to end with Steve being eaten alive before the dogs went on the hunt again, hungry for seconds.

Not on my watch, Steve thought again. But if he was the first to die there would be nobody left to watch them. *Nobody dies then. Not even me.*

"If El's closed the gate, then the dogs should all be dead by now," Lucas pointed out, offering a little hope.

"That's only if we're right about our hive mind theory," Dustin added.

"The dogs came running when we burned the hub, didn't they?" Lucas shot back. "We've got to be right! So if she's closed the gate and she's killed the Mind Flayer's army then it won't be too long till Hopper comes looking for us, right?"

"Right!" said Steve, clapping his hands together, desperate that they stay positive. "So we stay right here by this rope till the Chief comes to dig us out."

"Except...nobody knows we're here," said Max.

"Yeah, it's not like we left a note for Mrs Byers or anything," said Dustin.

"El can find us," Mike said softly. "If she's okay."

They all feel silent at that. Steve had only had the most garbled explanation from Dustin about who the little punk girl was who'd saved them at the Byers house. He knew that she'd been raised in the lab, that she was some kind of escaped experiment and she could supposedly close the gate *"with her mind"*, whatever that meant. Other than that, this Eleven kid was a mystery to him. But whoever she

was, Mike Wheeler was madly love with her, that much was obvious. They'd all overheard him having a nervous breakdown over her after Hopper had taken him aside at the house. Looking at Mike now, it seemed like the kid still hadn't quite picked up the shattered pieces of himself.

"She'll be okay, man," Steve consoled, trying to stay optimistic while having no idea if he was giving Mike false hope. "We're all going to be okay."

He reached out to clasp Mike's shoulder, but his hand missed it by several inches and sent him stumbling against the tunnel wall.

"Woah!" said Dustin, catching Steve's elbow. "Are *you* okay there, buddy?"

"Fine," said Steve, straightening up too fast and giving himself a head-rush. "I just have a little..."

"Concussion?" Lucas offered. "Dude, sit down before you fall down."

Steve tried to protest, but Dustin and Lucas got hold of his arms and pulled him down onto his ass. He took a few deep breaths into the handkerchief covering his mouth and rested his pounding head against his knees. He swore he could still feel Billy's knuckles denting his skin. He felt Dustin crouching down by his side. He could also hear that Dustin was coughing. The cough worried Steve, seeing as Dustin had been screaming about getting some of those freaky spores in his mouth earlier on their trek. Steve wanted to turn and get a look at his little friend. But his skull was way too heavy to lift just now. He closed his eyes for a moment and time became slippery. He couldn't be sure how much of it had passed. But suddenly his ears pricked up and he was aware of arguing voices. He shook himself awake.

"Mike, would you stop with the pacing already!" Lucas snapped, throwing up his hands.

Steve blinked to see Mike with the map and flashlight in his hands again, his skinny body twitching with nervous energy.

"What if El and Hopper need our help?" Mike was babbling. "Those dogs were headed straight back to the lab! What if they didn't die when the gate closed, huh? We have to go after them and make sure. If we follow their tracks then..."

"Dude, you're limping," said Steve, noticing how Mike winced over every step he took. "You're hurt."

"I'm fine," Mike insisted. "I just...I need to get to her..."

"Sit your ass down!" Steve barked, pointing to the dirt beside him.

Lucas and Max halted Mike in his restless pacing and sat him next to Steve. His own head still hadn't stopped throbbing, but Steve knew he needed to get his shit together and make sure the kids were okay before he worried about himself. He handed his nail bat to Max, asking her to keep a watch on the cave mouth, sensing she'd be better at wielding the weapon than any of these little nerd boys. Then Steve struggled onto his knees, hunching over Mike's left leg and peeling back his jeans and sock. Mike's ankle was badly bruised and swollen underneath his clothes.

"It...it's just a sprain," said Mike with a hiss. "From when that vine thing grabbed me."

Steve turned to the other kids with a sigh. "Any of you squirts know how to treat a twisted ankle?"

"Elevate the limb," Lucas said expertly. "Then bandage it up to prevent further injury."

"With what?" asked Steve, as he lifted Mike's foot up onto his thigh.

Lucas shrugged. "My dad taught me about field medicine, but I don't have a first aid kit on me."

"I told you, I'm fine," Mike muttered, struggling to get back on his feet.

"Shut up and stay put!" ordered Steve, his finger inches from Mike's nose.

Steve shrugged his jacket off one arm and started to rip a strip of fabric away from the sleeve underneath. Mike blinked at him, seeming stunned that Steve would ruin a shirt for his sake. Up until this week, Mike was the only one of these little runts that Steve had spent anytime decent around. Though that time had mostly consisted of dozens of awkward dinners at the Wheeler house. Steve used to get through them by chattering about baseball with Nancy's dad, conversations that Mike never joined in with. Mike hadn't talked much with anyone during those family meals. He had just sat slumped in his chair, stabbing at the food on his plate, while never seeming to eat any of it. At the time Steve had taken Mike for a moody middle child in the throes of puberty. Steve hadn't guessed that the kid was heartbroken.

Steve had learned a little about heartbreak himself during the last few days.

"Hey, if it'll make you any less pissy with me, Wheeler...I'm not dating your sister anymore."

Mike blinked a few times, his harsh stare softening behind the goggles.

"Yeah, I figured," said Mike. "So is Jonathan her boyfriend now?"

Steve swallowed. "I think Jonathan's been her real boyfriend for a while."

Mike frowned. "So...so why are you still hanging around?"

"Well, someone has to babysit you little bastards."

Steve tied off his clumsy bandage around Mike's ankle and raised his head. Speaking of lovebirds, Lucas and Max were currently standing in the tunnel, hugging each other for dear life, the nail bat dangling between them. Steve looked around for Dustin and flinched as he realized he was nowhere to be seen. Nobody was crouching at Steve's side. Nobody was coughing in the shadows.

"Where the hell's Henderson?!" Steve blurted at Lucas and Max, breaking up their cuddle. "Where did he go?"

"He...he said he had to take a piss," Lucas stammered out.

"And you let him go off alone?!" Steve exploded. "Okay, new rule! No splitting up! None of you leave my sight, not even to pee."

Lucas raised an eyebrow. "So...you're going to watch us all pee?"

"Gross," said Max, crinkling up her nose.

"Dustin!" Steve yelled down the tunnel. "Kid, get back here right now!"

No answer came from the passageway. Lucas and Max exchanged guilty looks. Steve let out a hiss of frustration, then got busy hauling Mike upright. He nodded for Max to hand the nail bat back to him, while Lucas stepped in to sling Mike's arm over his shoulder, helping him to walk. They all set off down the tunnel together, Steve leading the way. He couldn't believe it. He'd only been down here a few hours and already he'd managed to lose one of the little shits. He really needed to focus.

"Dustin, where are you!!" he yelled out again, then winced, embarrassed to hear his voice cracking.

He heard a cough out of the shadows, then a voice croaked; "I'm in here, guys."

Steve rushed ahead and stepped into the chamber just as Dustin was wiping a stray tear from his cheek. The kid was kneeling beside the body of a demodog, surrounded by candy wrappers. Steve quickly realized that this was Dustin's own demodog, the savage pet he'd tried to tame. Steve knew in spite of everything Dustin had felt a bond with that demonic creature. And a good thing he did, since that bond had saved them when Dustin had convinced Dart to let them all pass unharmed.

Dustin turned away from his dead dog as the other kids piled in behind Steve.

"We were right, Mike," said Dustin, sucking up his tears, suddenly the scientist again. "Without the Mind Flayer to control them, none of these monsters can live in our world. Dart's not sick or hurt. He's just

gone. Like he's been emptied. That must be what happened to the rest of them. That must mean that El's defeated him after all."

"She's killed his army?" said Lucas, a grin breaking out on his face. "She's killed everything he controls? Awesome!"

Lucas raised his hands for high-fives, then looked confused at why nobody was returning them.

"Yeah, awesome," Mike said, solemnly. "So long as the Mind Flayer wasn't still controlling Will. And so long as El survived the fight."

Lucas's smile faded and his arms fell at his sides. Steve's heart sank at the same time. He was just starting to feel the weight of these uncertainties crushing down on him. They couldn't say for sure whether any of their friends had survived the fight. They didn't know when or if they would be rescued from these tunnels. How much food and water did these kids have between them in their rucksacks? How long would the batteries in their flashlights last? Was it safe for them to even breathe the air down here or would they be slowly poisoned by toxins from that shadow dimension? Steve didn't know. All he knew was that he'd made a promise to Nance and he intended to keep it.

Dustin started to cough again and suddenly Max spoke up from the other side of the chamber.

"Hey guys," she said, pulling the scarf from her nose. "Can you smell that?"

Steve pulled the handkerchief from his own face for a moment and sniffed.

"Smoke," he muttered, swallowing hard. "It's coming from the hub. It's still burning."

Four faces turned to him again. Steve realized they were waiting for him to take the lead.

"Come on," he said. "Get your asses moving. I'm finding us a way out."

2. Day Three

"Hey...*hey!* Are you actually sleeping, Steve?"

It was Max's voice, breaking through his murky dreams.

"*Shush!*" Steve hissed back, grasping her hand as it yanked on his sleeve. "You...you're going to wake them..."

Steve struggled into an upright position, only to find that Dustin and Lucas were already on their feet, their flashlights pointing down diverging tunnels leading away from the current cave where they'd made camp. Mike was wide awake too, sitting with his bad ankle propped up on his rucksack. He was clutching his supercom, holding it close to his ear.

"I heard something," Max went on, not bothering to keep her voice down. "Like a rumbling, far off. I think we need to move again."

"*Guys!*" Steve snapped at them all. "What is the point of us taking it in turns to stand guard if you little dipshits all stay awake at the same time?!"

Steve shook his head, feeling like a tired parent at a particularly rowdy restless sleepover. The kids needed to conserve their energy.

"We're *bored* of sleeping," Lucas complained. "We did enough sleeping yesterday. And if Max is right too much lying around is going to get us buried alive."

"Hey, there hasn't been a cave in since that first night," Steve reminded them. "Don't let's start getting paranoid."

"I'm just telling you what I heard," said Max. "It sounded like earth falling away somewhere down that tunnel leading back to the hub."

Steve swallowed, his skin prickling. As far as they could tell, the Mind Flayers hub had collapsed during their first night in the tunnels. At the time, they had actually been grateful for the cave in since it seemed to have put out the fire they had set there. With the tunnels no longer burning, it'd simply been a matter of staying ahead of the

smoke and dust clouds that had been stalking them through the passageways, chasing them deeper into the underground maze. The air down here tasted dirty, sickly and alien. Upside Down air. It was their third day trapped down here and they were all still covering their eyes and mouths as much as they could. It hadn't stopped them all developing coughs with Dustin's cough being the worst of all, chesty and persistent, like it was scratching at his lungs. His skin looked clammy in the torchlight. Steve was scared his little buddy might be coming down with some kind of inter-dimensional pneumonia and he had no idea what to do for him.

"We need to find better air to breathe," Steve muttered.

Dustin sat down beside him. "Maybe the air would be better if we -"

His words were cut off by another hacking coughing fit. Steve reached out to rub his back.

"Dude, you need water!" Steve insisted. "Just take a few extra sips from your canteen."

Dustin shook his head furiously. "It's not rationing time yet!" He checked his watch. "Two more hours."

Steve couldn't even argue with him. Dustin was the unimpeachable boss of their food and water supplies. Because he was the only one of the kids who'd thought to bring food and water supplies in his rucksack. Dustin's rations consisted of the remains of his Halloween candy, along with a tube of Pringles, some trail mix and a few pieces of bruised fruit. Dustin had carefully counted these food items and divided them up into five portions, declaring that they could all have a tiny snack and a few sips of water, once a day for the next week. And if they didn't escape or get rescued within a week, then they were pretty much screwed. They had already taken a vote and unanimously agreed *not* to try cooking the dead demodog. Partly because meat from a dark alternate dimension couldn't be good for them, partly because they didn't want to risk another fire, but mostly because none of them wanted to upset Dustin by eating his pet.

"In the meantime," Dustin went on. "I'd say Max is right. I think we'd better keep moving."

Lucas nodded. "I second that," he asserted, already reaching down for their bags and equipment.

"I still don't know why we don't use the bat and just...*smash* our way out of this hellhole!" Max fumed.

"Yeah, because *that's* the best way to avoid being buried in a cave in," Steve sniped back.

"El can find us," said Mike, for maybe the fiftieth time. "We'll make it harder for her if we keep moving."

The rest of them shared frustrated looks. Mike had been fiddling ceaselessly with the dials of his walkie talkie for the last two days. It didn't matter how many times Lucas and Dustin insisted Mike was never going to get any signal down in the tunnels. Mike kept insisting right back that El wouldn't need any signal to make contact with him.

"She's close," Mike murmured, dodging their stares. "I know it. I...I can feel it."

Steve's first thought was, *this is it, Wheeler's going to be the first kid who cracks up*. And then pretty soon he would have four sick starving kids going nuts on him. If he ever got them home to their parents, emaciated and barely sane, then he'd probably be sued or jailed for being the most grossly irresponsible babysitter of the decade. Nevermind that the little shits had kidnapped him after he'd been beaten unconscious. He'd be the one blamed for these children getting trapped and traumatized underground.

He took a breath to calm himself and then caught the steely determination in Mike's eyes. That look gave him a sudden shiver. It reminded Steve so much of Nancy. He thought that if Mike had even half of his big sister's brains and guts then maybe it was worth letting him stick with his plan. The kid had been right about the hive mind, hadn't he?

"I'm with Wheeler," said Steve. "We stay here. We wait for them to make contact."

"Well, the vote is three to two so shut up and grab your stuff,

Harrington," Max sneered, tossing her hair.

"Hey!! What did I say from the moment we got into these tunnels?" Steve yelled back. "I'm the adult here. I'm in charge. I'm leading this mission. So if I say that we stay, then that vetos all of your little pissant votes! Like Mike said...if this girl's got some kind of psychic radar then she's got to be our best hope of rescue."

Max didn't back down. Since she had taken the last watch she still held the nail bat. She shook it in her fist as she glared up at Steve.

"You can't tell me what to do!" she snapped. "I'm sick of big-headed stupid-haired jock boys telling me what to do! *Screw you!!* I can find my own way out."

With that, Max turned on her heels, marching out of the cave, swinging the nail bat at her side. Lucas caught her hand before she could leave.

"Max, wait! We promised not to split up..." Lucas softened his tone, trying to look her in the eyes. "Just tell them what you told me. Tell them what's wrong...they'll understand." The little redhead shot Lucas a reproachful scowl, looking like she might just punch him. Lucas sighed. Turning to the group, he said, "She's claustrophobic."

Max did punch him in the arm for that. "You promised not to tell!" she exploded.

She sat down hard against the wall, her fingers gripping her hair, her eyes darting around the tiny cave with its contaminated air.

"Hey, hey...it's okay," Steve said, coming to crouch before her, trying to meet her nervous stare. "Claustrophobia...that's just a fear of enclosed spaces, right? I bet lots of people have it. Everyone has something they're afraid of. Sinclair, what's your phobia? What scares you the most?"

Lucas winced. "The dark," he admitted.

Max blinked up at him. "Seriously?"

"At home...I still sleep with a night light."

"Wuss." She shook her head at him. "So why aren't you freaking out about being in the dark down here?"

"If the batteries in our flashlights run out before we get rescued...I will be."

"Shit, we'll all be freaking out if that happens," said Steve. For some reason talking about their worst fears had a way of easing them, like lancing a wound and letting it drain. Steve beckoned for all the kids to huddle up closer around his flashlight, because sharing hidden insecurities seemed to be doing them some good too. "How about you, Henderson? Worst fear?"

"The Demogorgon is going to take some beating," Dustin answered, between coughs. "I got scared of that thing just when it showed up in our D&D campaigns. I think it was that voice Mike used to do for it. Kind of psycho." Dustin sat beside his friend, nudging his elbow. "What about you, Mike?"

Mike held Dustin's stare. "I used to be scared of heights."

For some reason Steve didn't understand, Dustin's mouth fell open when he heard this.

"Really?" Dustin put his hand on Mike's arm. "Oh man, I..."

Mike cut him off. "But now I think my worst fear is, just...losing my friends."

Steve caught the crack in Mike's voice and sensed the tears filling up his goggles. The group fell silent and Steve didn't share his own fears, which were every single thing the kids had already listed, especially this last one. He'd only been responsible for these little brats for a matter of days. He still wasn't sure if they'd even count him as a friend. But already Steve felt like there was nothing that scared him more than losing one of them.

Suddenly the radio in Mike's hand began to crackle.

"Mike," said a voice through the static. A young girl's voice. "Mike, can you..."

Mike was on his feet in a split second, yanking the scarf from his face.

"El!" he yelled into the walkie talkie. "El, are you okay? Is Will okay? Is...is everyone still alive?!"

Mike stumbled on his sprained ankle and Steve leapt up to steady him while the other kids all huddled around to listen.

"Alive, yes," the girl they called El confirmed. "All okay. All safe. Except for you."

"We're okay too," Mike assured her. "We're just trapped in the tunnels. We've got a little lost in Will's map."

More static fuzzed over her voice for a moment. Then they heard her loud and clear.

"Hold on," El said. "We'll find you. We're coming."

3. Day Six

"It doesn't make any damn sense," Dustin muttered between hoarse breaths.

"What doesn't make sense?" asked Steve.

They lay beside each other on the cold damp floor of their latest cave camp, speaking in hushed voices. Dustin had one of their few remaining flashlights in his hands and was rummaging through his rucksack. Both of them were wide awake despite the fact that neither were on watch right now. Dustin's chest pains were robbing him of rest and Steve couldn't sleep for worry over his friend's worsening health. He had been hanging on Dustin's every hacking cough, scared the kid was going to hock up a lung, his retching was getting so bad.

"I've got more Three Musketeers bars left than I should have," said Dustin.

"We have extra food? And that's a bad thing?" said Steve.

"Yes!" Dustin insisted. "It means that someone isn't eating."

Steve winced. He'd finally noticed then.

"You must've counted wrong. Don't sweat it, man. You're exhausted. You're running a fever."

Dustin gave him a knowing look. "I wasn't sick on our first night in the tunnels, Steve. The night when I made my full inventory of our food supplies and carefully divided them for all five of us, I felt fine. Somebody has been sneaking their share back into my backpack."

Steve shrugged off his accusing glare. "I keep telling you. Nobody likes nougat."

"Steve," Dustin snapped, forcing him to meet his eyes. "There's way too much trail mix and Pringles left over in the tube too. I know it's you that's putting your food back, alright? I know you're trying to sacrifice your own share so we can have more. But think about it, Steve. You're bigger than the rest of us. You need more sustenance.

You're also recovering from a likely concussion and cracked ribs. You're not going to be able to protect us if you don't look after yourself first." His lecturing tone softened into concern. "Seriously man, starving yourself won't help."

"Listen dude, I...I'm surprisingly not hungry!" Steve insisted.

As if angered by this blatant lie and determined to betray him, Steve's stomach growled immediately after he said this. Steve squeezed his arms around his belly, which was still badly bruised from Billy's kicks as well as painfully empty. He'd gone two full days and nights without food now. But honestly, it had got to the point where eating a tiny candy bar might be worse torture than eating nothing at all. Steve couldn't tease his appetite with insubstantial snacks. He didn't want a mouthful of nougat. He wanted a king sized bucket of fried chicken. He wanted five hamburgers and three triple thick milkshakes to wash them down.

"Look, I'll eat after we're rescued, okay? Trust me, I'll eat a fast food restaurant's worth of junk food all to myself."

Dustin rolled his eyes, fishing into his bag and holding out a Three Musketeers.

"No. You eat this," Dustin ordered. "Now. I'm going to watch you."

Steve checked his watch, tapping its digital display. "It's not ration time yet," he pointed out, using Dustin's own rules against him. "There's four more hours to go. If nobody comes for us during that time, then fine - I'll eat with the rest of you. I promise."

Dustin coughed again, then opened his mouth to argue some more.

His words caught in his throat as the flashlight he was holding dimmed and turned dark.

"Son of a bitch," Dustin muttered. "Now we only have one left."

In unison, Steve and Dustin turned to Lucas, who was standing watch, the last of their torches in his hands.

"Hey Sinclair," said Steve, still trying to keep his voice hushed, since

Mike and Max were asleep on the other side of the cave. "You okay?"

Lucas didn't turn to face them. He was pointing his own light down at his feet.

"The water level's rising again, guys," Lucas told them.

Steve swallowed, apprehension prickling up his spine. One half of their latest cave refuge was underwater. They'd come to this cave with the pool just two days ago, guided by instructions from El, spoken through Mike's walkie talkie. By the time they reached this cave, the batteries in Mike's Supercom had run out too, severing their line to the little girl with superpowers. They had no idea what the rescue plan was supposed to be beyond making it to this cave. El might have only brought them here for the fresh water trickling from the wall. According to the rough map that Mike had scrawled based on Will's drawings this water source might be linked to the quarry. Lucas had been speculating that there might actually be tunnels in the cave pool that led outside. Lucas had even offered to try diving in the pool to see if he could find an escape route. Lucas swore he could hold his breath for seven minutes underwater. That he could use that time to find a way out.

Steve had told Lucas firmly that *'that's a no'*. There had been no further discussion.

"We need to wake Mike and Max," said Lucas, turning to them at last. "We all need to move closer to the far wall...before this whole place is flooded."

Steve nodded and started to crawl towards the two members of their party who were managing to sleep. As Steve got closer to Mike, he noticed that the Wheeler kid was twitching and murmuring in his sleep. The moment Steve gently touched Mike's shoulder, he shot bolt upright, a shriek escaping his lips, his breathing ragged.

"Hey, hey, hey...you alright, man?" Steve asked. "Just...just take a breath. You're okay."

Mike avoided his eyes. His scream had woken up Max too, who looked tense and nervy as ever, though she didn't lash out.

"Did you have the falling dream again?" Dustin asked his friend.

Mike winced. "Yeah...I hit the water this time. I was sinking deeper when you woke me. I couldn't...couldn't breathe."

Mike still seemed to be struggling for breath now, like he was already drowning. Mike was not reacting well to being camped so close to the quarry. He had been having little PTSD episodes like this one every time he tried to sleep. Dustin had now told them all the alarming story of how Mike Wheeler once jumped off a cliff to save his baby teeth. Steve had felt a lurch of vertigo just thinking about it.

"Guys!" said Lucas, snagging their attention once more. "Did you hear what I said?"

"I heard you!" Steve snapped back. "None of your little dweebs are taking a dip in that water, alright? That is *final*."

"I don't even know how to..." Mike muttered, crossing his elbows over his knees.

"What did you say?" asked Max. "Did you just say that...you can't swim?"

Mike's pinched his eyes closed, burying his face behind his forearms. It hadn't escaped Steve's notice that there was a little hostility between Mike and Max. With the implicit confirmation that Mike couldn't swim, Max initially opened her mouth to gloat. But she quickly shut it again, as a shudder shook Mike's thin frame.

"Dude..." Dustin began. "Are you telling me that when you jumped off that cliff, not only were you afraid of heights...you couldn't even swim?!"

"Just forget it, alright?" Mike muttered, raising his eyes enough to glare at them all. "It's no big deal."

Dustin blinked a few times, looking like he was about to say something heartfelt, but quickly dissolved into a coughing fit instead.

"I could've told you about the swimming thing," said Lucas. "Me and Mike have been neighbors our whole lives and I've never seen him

doing anything that could be described as athletic activity beyond riding a bike. He's dodged shooting hoops with me for years. Probably couldn't even lift the ball with those skinny arms."

"Look!" Mike said sharply. "Nancy was always the swimmer in our family, alright? She won a bunch of medals in the swimming club at our local pool. She learned lifeguard skills and everything. I just didn't want to be competing at something with my sister. So yeah...I never really learned. Like I said, don't make a big deal of it."

"Mike, it's a problem," said Lucas. "Because even though the rest of you numbskulls may not have accepted this fact...we *are* going to have to swim to get out of this cave! Why else do you think El led us here? She was showing us our best way out!"

"What?" Steve spluttered, not liking the way Lucas had looked directly at him when saying the word '*numbskulls*'. "I already said NO to diving! That water is freezing and you'll catch your death. Dustin's already sick, I don't need the rest of you turning invalid on me. At this point, I'm tired of playing nursemaid to your ungrateful little asses!"

It was Steve's hunger, exhaustion and bruises that were doing the talking now. He didn't really mean what he said. Babysitting these obnoxious little shits was really the only thing that had been keeping him going. If he'd been down in these tunnels alone, he'd have given up and gone crazy. He probably needed these kids more than they needed him.

Lucas eyeballed him with a steely glare. He tightened the bandana round his head.

"The only way we're getting out of here," said Lucas, "...is if one of us stops being a pussy."

With that oath, Lucas turned, dropped the flashlight on the cave floor and plunged beneath the cave water. Mike and Dustin cried out their friend's name in alarm, while Max leapt to her feet, marching to the waters edge, looking ready to dive in after him. Steve barely caught hold of her arm in time.

"No!" Steve barked, shoving his nail bat into Max's capable hands. "You stay here! Don't worry, I'll..."

Well, there really was only one thing he could do. Without waiting another moment to think, Steve dove in after Lucas. He counted himself a strong swimmer. He'd had that big pool in his parent's yard to practice in ever since he was small. However, Steve wasn't used to swimming fully clothed. He wasn't used to swimming half-starved with possible cracked ribs and concussion. He wasn't used to swimming blindly through ice cold water thickened with dirt. Luckily for Steve, Lucas was making slow progress too. He caught the kid's floundering foot close to the far cave wall and hauled him to the surface. Lucas spat and spluttered, gulping for air.

"What the hell were you thinking?!" Steve gagged, holding Lucas at arms length in the pool.

Steve's voice had come out strained and furious, but all he wanted to do was get Lucas back to shore and wrap him up in a blanket that they didn't have.

"Tunnel..." Lucas rasped, between wheezes. "There's a tunnel down there. I felt the edges of it."

Steve winced. If what Lucas said was true then maybe he had been right this whole time. Maybe Mike's little telekinetic girlfriend had led them to this spot so that he could find a way out for them. He realized he couldn't waste anymore time with thinking. It was time that he acted. Time that he quit being a pussy. And with that thought he shoved Lucas back through the water, ordering him to swim for shore. Then he took a deep breath into his lungs and ducked his head beneath the surface once more.

Steve pawed around in the dark murky waters until he found Lucas's tunnel. It was a tight and narrow opening, but Steve had a lanky enough frame to slip inside it. He reached out all around him to grasp at rocks that he could use to pull himself forwards. He had no idea how long the tunnel was or if he could hold his breath until there was opportunity to resurface. He supposed he could always turn back when his lungs started burning. Then he realized his lungs were already gasping for air. And there was no room to turn in the tunnel.

Suddenly none of that mattered. Something smashed hard against Steve's skull and he knew no more.

He knew nothing until...*until*...

He felt sharp stones against his back. Then two hands pressing rhythmically on his chest. Then two lips closing over his, breathing air deep into his lungs. Steve's body jerked upright, spluttering out streams of swallowed water. Five sets of hands gently rolled him to one-side till he had finished gagging. Then Steve heard Dustin chuckling with relief.

"I knew it," said Dustin. "I knew you were too awesome to die on us, Steve Harrington."

Steve blinked, struggling to focus on the shadowy figures huddled around him. Yeah, it turned out he wasn't dead. But if he'd survived that tunnel then that must mean somebody had saved him. Slowly his eyes stopped blurring and he realized there was a new person in the cave with them. And not just any person. The one and only Nancy Wheeler, wearing a wet-suit, a snorkel and a very worried expression. It must have been Nance who had revived him, given him the kiss of life. Steve hadn't thought he'd ever get to kiss her again.

"Don't be mad, okay?" Steve choked out. "I told the kids we should stay on the bench."